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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000871

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: SPDC SILENT ON ASEAN CHAIR ANNOUNCEMENT

REF: A. RANGOON 825 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. VIENTIANE 814

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 4784

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The announcement in Vientiane that Burma would relinquish its rotation to the ASEAN chair apparently came as a complete surprise to many GOB officials and diplomats in Rangoon. Official state media has thus far ignored the development entirely and GOB officials refuse to comment. Despite quiet satisfaction among many observers that the regime has been denied further legitimacy, few expect ASEAN to now confront Burma in any meaningful way and thus conclude that the SPDC has simply gained more time to maintain the status quo. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Burma's military regime, as anticipated, held its cards close on the ASEAN chair issue until the July 26 joint communique in Vientiane. Prior to issuance of the communique, press reports indicated that senior GOB officials in Vientiane were predictably ambiguous, leaving many in Rangoon to conclude that the issue would remain unresolved for months to come.

[1](#)3. (SBU) However, the announcement that FM Nyan Win had informed the ASEAN ministers that Burma would relinquish its rotation to the ASEAN chair in 2006 apparently came as a significant surprise to many GOB officials and diplomats in Rangoon. Ref C indicated that the Thai believe the Burmese decision rested with Than Shwe and was not made until the last minute; such a scenario is highly probable (ref A).

[1](#)4. (C) As the news broke from Vientiane on July 26, we contacted a variety of GOB officials and offices, including at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Information, and they all expressed genuine surprise about the development and said they knew absolutely nothing about the apparent GOB decision. As of COB July 27, official state television and press has ignored the development entirely and GOB officials refuse to make any comment.

[1](#)5. (C) Our next opportunity to seek reliable clarification from the GOB would have been an MFA-hosted departure dinner for the COM scheduled for the evening of June 27. However, following the Vientiane announcement, the MFA canceled the dinner, citing "other obligations."

[1](#)6. (C) ASEAN diplomats in Rangoon only learned about the development from our inquiries for reactions. The Malaysian Ambassador said "this decision means that the Lady (ASSK) will now be detained for a very long time." The Thai Ambassador, caught off guard by the announcement, declined to speculate if the visit to Burma on July 25 of his Deputy Prime Minister had tipped the GOB balance. Of note, the Philippines Ambassador was also unaware of the development, and said that, given domestic politics in Manila, her country would "have to look strong and indicate our willingness to be the next ASEAN chair, but we're concerned that Burma will resent it."

[1](#)7. (C) NLD leaders, having reiterated their view to the COM on July 25 that Burma should be denied the chair, told Emboffs on July 27 that they were pleased about the outcome. However, they concluded the decision is clearly a strategy on the part of the SPDC to avoid splitting ASEAN and losing the non-interference relationship the regime enjoys with its neighbors. The NLD plans to issue a statement o/a July 27 or 28, noting that the regime took a pass on the chair in favor of "national reconciliation" and demanding a meaningful dialogue. NLD Chairman U Aung Shwe also told us that FM Nyan Win's apparent snub in Vientiane of UN Special Envoy Razali was a clear sign of the regime's utter disregard for the UN process and the rest of the international community.

[1](#)8. (C) Comment: Despite quiet satisfaction among many observers in Rangoon that the regime has been denied the "honor" of hosting ASEAN, and the further legitimacy that such a role could have bestowed on the SPDC, there is also much trepidation. Few expect ASEAN to confront Burma in any meaningful way over democracy and human rights issues,

leaving many in Rangoon to conclude that the regime has again succeeded in doing what it does so well: simply buy more time to maintain the status quo. End Comment.
Martinez